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Hearing of the United States Senate Appropriations Committee Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, and Related Agencies

Impact of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)

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Good morning, Senator Harkin, Senator Cochran, and members of the subcommittee. I am Jerry Weast, superintendent of schools for Montgomery County, Maryland. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Montgomery County Public Schools on the impact of federal stimulus aid under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act on K-12 education and the funding issues that we face at the expiration of ARRA. In our community, the federal stimulus aid saves the jobs of teachers while improving the quality of education for all children. My message is: Thanks for your valuable help for our kids, but please don't withdraw it at such a critical juncture. We can't afford to go backwards on the progress that we have made.

Background

Montgomery County, Maryland, Public Schools (MCPS) is the nation's 16th largest school district. Located just outside Washington, D.C., the district serves 142,000 students with approximately 22,000 teachers, support professionals, and administrators. The district is proud of its accomplishments during the last decade in improving the level of student achievement and closing the gap between white and Asian American students and African American and Hispanic students. Our district is very diverse with no single racial or ethnic majority. African Americans comprise 23 percent of the students, 23 percent are Hispanic, 16 percent Asian American, and 38 percent white. The families of our students come from 164 countries and speak over 130 languages. More than 40,000 students are eligible for Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMS), up nearly 4,000 just this year, a record for our district. We have improved performance with 78 percent of students taking Honors or Advanced Placement courses. The percentage of African American and Hispanic students who score a 3 or higher on AP exams surpasses the national percentage for all students. In fact, only New York City has more African American students who score college ready on AP exams than Montgomery County and

they have nine times more African American students than we do. Nearly half of our graduates go on to complete college within six years, almost double the national average.

The new federal ARRA law provides states and localities an opportunity to strengthen academic progress and avoid some of the most harmful cuts to education and other public services. The law particularly recognizes the importance of protecting education from the most painful reductions that could occur because of the economic recession. In Maryland, unemployment has risen sharply and state and local tax revenues are down. I am very pleased that Governor Martin O'Malley moved quickly to use the fiscal assistance the law provides to protect funding for state aid to education. He devoted the state fiscal stabilization funding included in the new law to protect funding formulas under the state's Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act. However, with the state facing a \$2 billion potential shortfall in FY 2011, it will prove challenging to maintain the level of state aid to education. Continued federal support is crucial to permitting school districts such as Montgomery County to keep moving forward to improve achievement for all students.

Montgomery County has received \$28 million from the state fiscal stabilization fund during the first year of implementation. This alone saved approximately 200 jobs that would have been lost had state aid been cut as originally anticipated in the governor's budget.

The law also includes specific increases for education grants to local school districts based on established formulas for Title I, special education, and other established programs. This provides immediate help to many of our must vulnerable students, those impacted by poverty and disabilities. We have targeted federal funds at improving early childhood programs. MCPS has received \$12 million for Title I and \$33 million for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) over two years. This additional grant revenue has enabled us to save or create 150 jobs. This aid redeems the long-stated but shortchanged promises by the federal government to these students. It is aligned with the MCPS strategic plan to close the achievement gap that disproportionately affects these students.

The Montgomery County Board of Education moved quickly to include this federal aid in its FY 2010 Operating Budget. Within a week of passage, I presented a plan to the Board of Education. This gave elected officials and the public a very clear and specific idea of how MCPS is using the additional federal funding. It allowed us to begin work with schools on the practical steps to get stimulus money to the classroom as fast as possible. Much of this additional funding, however, takes the form of targeted grants that do not impact the fiscal shortfall faced by the county or the state. Federal grant funds do not replace unrestricted local funding.

Let me highlight some of the specific way in which our school district has utilized federal funds to improve educational quality.

Special Education

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) was fortunate to receive approximately \$33 million dollars in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds. MCPS is a district that believes in the strategic planning process as an effective way to improve student achievement. We stay informed about strategies that work—collect and analyze data—and then focus funds on the areas that will make the biggest difference as we move our students along the path to college and career readiness.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) ARRA funds are making a difference in MCPS. We were able save or create 90 jobs. We added about 30 special education teachers and 40 paraeducators to better meet the needs of our 16,800 students with disabilities. An additional 20 special education teacher positions were saved through ARRA. A staffing model that helps students to receive the support that they need in their neighborhood school, known as hours-based staffing, was expanded.

Hours-based staffing is a service delivery model that provides equitable and appropriate staffing of special education teachers and paraeducators based on the total number of direct instructional service hours on student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This staffing model addresses the individualized instructional needs of students and provides resources for more flexible programming options such as coteaching and supported general education classes, as well as special classes for students who may require this level of instructional support. Hours-based staffing supports the provision of special education services within neighborhood schools rather than in segregated settings. When you consider the range of needs of preschool through high school students who qualify for special education, you can easily imagine how critical these positions are at the individual school and student level.

Staffing has never been more important as the complexity of student needs continues to increase. For example, we serve over 1,496 students who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, an increase of about 87 percent in just five years. We have very high functioning students with Asperger's Syndrome who need support in their full-inclusion academic classes, as well as students who require one-to-one support and sophisticated communication devices to make their needs known. We thank you on behalf of our students and their families as the quality of each child's education was enhanced through these much needed human resources.

Human resources are a priority for us, even though we are well aware of the impending "funding cliff." As a part of our goal to have a highly effective teacher in every classroom, we focused ARRA dollars on professional development. We followed our systemic plan and required professional development for special and general education teachers on effective coteaching practices, including funds for enhanced planning time. We identified effective intervention programs in reading and mathematics, purchased materials, and again made sure that initial professional development and follow up on how to implement the interventions was provided. We looked at the needs of our staff to work with special populations with unique needs, such as children with Down Syndrome, and ensured that this training was provided over time to incorporate the most training that

would have long-term impact aligned with what we know about effective professional development.

To support the implementation of our curriculum, we purchased selected materials for schools and therapists to further incorporate the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (i.e., Braille writers for our students with visual needs). We initiated a UDL pilot program that incorporates teacher training on effective teaching practices with the integration of technology into the instructional program.

The social-emotional needs of our students and the importance of school climate were our focus as we increased the number of schools in our district that implement the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. PBIS was first made available through the United States Department of Education. It is having a lasting impact on our schools and our students. We also established a collaborative program for our students with emotional or behavioral issues, working with our local Mental Health Association.

We built a user-friendly system to capture required student data through the IEP team process. This data will greatly enhance our ability to provide information to parents and to plan effectively for students, particularly in the area of staffing and supports. Finally, we purchased new standardized assessments for use by our school psychologists that increased efficiency by making use of software systems that automate scoring, allowing them to spend more time with students and families, and less time hand-scoring somewhat cumbersome evaluations.

When P.L. 94-142 was enacted, Congress' intent, through a phasing in of funding, was for states to reach full funding by Fiscal Year 1981. Although Congress has not yet met its financial obligation, states embraced the intent of the law to educate students with disabilities using evidence-based educational practices. Consequences to this funding shortfall resulted in states and local districts providing full support for this unfunded federal mandate.

With the addition of ARRA funds, MCPS was able to more appropriately fund those services to which students with disabilities are entitled.

Without the ARRA allocation, key programs and priorities will need to be reexamined. With special education student projections on the rise, current staffing models will need to be reevaluated to ensure the appropriate delivery of services to students with IEPs. Professional development opportunities will lack the funding needed to train the large numbers of teachers, paraeducators, and related services provides who interact with students with disabilities on any given day. All school systems, including MCPS, will be challenged to support nationally recognized educational practices such as UDL and assistive technology.

ARRA funding has temporarily and partially provided the level of funding originally intended for special education, removing an undue burden on local tax payers and jurisdictions. With continued funding for special education services through ARRA, there will be less of a burden on the local tax payer, states, and local jurisdictions. Congress

will be closer to meeting the long-established funding level. Because of ARRA, MCPS was able to more appropriately fund services for students with disabilities which include, but are not limited to, increased allocations of special educators and paraeducators, enhanced professional development, expansion of UDL, and the development of an in-house special education student data system.

Title I

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) funds were used to provide assistance to MCPS schools that have a high concentration of students highly impacted by poverty, mobility, and limited English proficiency. In order to help improve teaching and learning for students most at risk of failing to meet state standards and to close the achievement gap, the funds were used to support the comprehensive summer program in seven Title I ARRA schools. The summer school instructional program gives students an opportunity to preview the upcoming grade level standards in reading and mathematics for rising kindergarten through grade five students. There is no cost to families for this program.

We used ARRA funds to expand eight half-day Head Start classes to a full day and continue to fund the existing 13 full-day Head Start classes. The full-day program provides additional instructional time in 21 classes for 420 students from low-income families living at or below the federal poverty level. The full-day curriculum helps students master the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for optimal school learning in kindergarten and beyond.

We increased the number of high poverty schools receiving Title I federal funds from 28 to 30 and maintained funding for five Title I schools that may have been eliminated from Title I. We increased support for homeless and neglected students in MCPS. Funds provide tutoring and materials to students in shelters and alternative programs.

These programs created or saved a total of 56 jobs. We added a total of 13 positions, including 8 teaching positions in reading and mathematics for all students including those with limited English proficiency (LEP) and 4 paraprofessional positions to support students with the instructional program in reading and mathematics, and a parent community coordinator position for outreach to families.

We saved a total of 43 positions, including 27 teaching positions in reading and mathematics for all students including those with limited English proficiency, 14 paraprofessional positions, and 2 parent community coordinators.

If ARRA funding is discontinued, we will have to eliminate the added and saved positions despite continued increases in the number of eligible students. We will have to reduce the number of full-day Head Start programs, reduce the number of students able to attend summer school programs, and reduce the number of parent outreach programs, especially English literacy classes for parents. With the growing number of families that do not speak English, we must increase parent involvement activities to include more English literacy classes for parents whose native language is not English and programs

that assist parents in helping their children with academic homework and projects. We must offer alternative/extended day and year programs for students who would not be involved in academic activities beyond the school day.

Other ARRA Funding

Finally, the unrestricted federal funds enabled us to avoid \$28 million of planned reductions. We restored academic intervention teachers to help schools with students not achieving at expected levels, teacher positions in the exciting Middle School Magnet Consortium that is providing accelerated instruction in our neediest middle schools, and we avoided some planned reductions of counselors and of staff development or reading teachers in our smaller elementary schools. MCPS also received ARRA grants to increase services to homeless children and youth, and for school lunch equipment replacement. We also expect to compete for ARRA Innovation grants to expand our successful initiatives for an accelerated integrated curriculum as a national model.

Future Funding Concerns

Despite the additional federal aid, balancing the budget was possible only because of significant reductions elsewhere in the budget. Our employees sacrificed \$89 million in cost-of-living wage increases and we reduced \$31 million from the budget through painful but necessary reductions. In order to achieve additional savings this year, we are cutting more than \$30 million of spending. Our central administrative costs are less than 2 percent of the budget, one of the lowest proportions in Maryland. The federal ARRA aid has not provided local districts with a free ride or an excuse not to make painful cuts--ARRA has saved us from even more draconian cuts that would have reduced essential classroom services.

We realize, however, that the current federal support is temporary, that we face a "funding cliff." Under current law, ARRA support ends in FY 2012. To avoid a fiscal crisis then, we are maximizing one-time spending that can support long-term educational improvement without a permanent commitment of local funds. This includes teacher training, school materials and equipment, and technology.

The end of federal stimulus support could create a significant crisis for our district. Our county faces a \$70 million shortfall this fiscal year because of sharply deteriorating tax revenue. Although unemployment in Montgomery County is significantly less than in much of the rest of the nation, it has nearly doubled this year to unprecedented levels. Next year, the county faces a potential budget gap of \$600 million. As property values have deteriorated, the recession also threatens future property tax revenue over the long term. Our recovery is likely to be very slow. This means that our fiscal crisis will likely worsen in FY 2012 and could continue for several years.

A discontinuation of federal support in education and other areas also will create a major crisis for the state budget. Maryland is facing a \$2 billion shortfall for FY 2011, which will mean major cuts at the state level and a reduction in state aid to localities, nearly all of which is for education. The Montgomery County Board of Education is determined not to give up or lose ground in the improvements in student performance that we have

made over the last decade. Continuing federal help targeted at our most vulnerable students will allow us to prevent the most damaging reductions and continue to stimulate the economy by avoiding as many layoffs as possible.

This is good for our county now and valuable for our children over the long-term. Let's not lose sight of the fact that the entire federal education funding strategy is critical to every student's success. All of the funding, whether it be for IDEA, Title I, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Race to the Top and even the funding for school lunches, needs to be aligned to give sequence and energy to our goal of preparing every child for college.

I would like to point out that every student who graduates from college can expect to earn \$772,000 more than a high school graduate over a lifetime of work. Our graduates who go on to graduate from college at a higher rate than the national average can expect to earn a total of nearly \$1.5 billion more over a lifetime of work. That makes a quality education one of the best investments we can make. Your help can make a critically important difference in achieving improved academic results.

Thanks for the opportunity to present our views on these important issues at this public hearing. I welcome your questions.